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re: Timor Leste

Para: Dr. Luisa Teotónio Pereira

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East Timor: The Shame Endures

A European empire retrenches, leaving a distant dependency to fend for itself. The vulnerable enclave is then invaded and annexed by its powerful neighbor, a major oil exporter with a formidable army and a notorious human rights record.

Kuwait in 1990? Yes, but also East Timor in 1975. With a few honorable exceptions, the rest of the world winked at Indonesia's brazen aggression then. Worse still, the winking continues today.

Today marks the 15th anniversary of Indonesia's grab. How fitting it would be if President Bush used the occasion to condemn what America never should have condoned in the first place.

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Portugal ruled East Timor for 450 years. Lisbon's 1974 revolution brought instant decolonization, and instant civil war in East Timor. Fretilin, the leftist contender, triumphed. On Nov. 28, 1975, East Timor declared its independence; on Dec. 7, Indonesia, the ruler of West Timor, invaded.

The invasion, which used U.S.-supplied military equipment in violation of American law, came one day after President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger left Jakarta. Saigon had fallen to the North Vietnamese, and Washington was ready to accept Jakarta's claim that it acted to halt the Communist tide coursing through the region.

Between 100,000 and 200,000 Timorese died between 1974 and 1980, most at the hands of the Indonesian Army. One-seventh of the territory's population was annihilated, proportionately a steeper toll than that inflicted on Cambodia by Pol Pot. To hide its crimes, Jakarta sealed off East Timor from most foreign contact until last year.

Since 1982 a native Timorese Governor, Mario Vegas Carrascalao, has tried to soften official repression. But on a recent visit to the territory, The Times's Steven Erlanger found only limited gains. He reported that the principal city, Dili, "has the atmosphere of a police state," and that in the countryside, civilians have been killed for such offenses as inattention during the raising of the Indonesian flag.

Earlier this year, after Indonesian police beat Timorese who had met with U.S. Ambassador John Monjo, the Ambassador registered his official concern. But Washington seems reluctant to take a stronger stand on the Timor issue for fear of antagonizing Jakarta. Last month 223 U.S. representatives from both parties signed a letter asking the Bush Administration to use its influence to help ease repression and encourage peace talks.

For 15 years this aggression has stood. Even at this late date, President Bush could serve America's principles and honor by raising his voice.